The Patriot coup d'état in Curaçao, 1796

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INTRODUCTION¹

Slavery and race were not the only contentious issues shaking up Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions. Violent confrontations between the military and the urban free whites and coloureds of Willemstad had preceded the 1795 slave revolt. In the years following the revolt, urban oppositional movements had a profound impact on island politics. These conflicts highlight the depth of the political instability on Curaçao in an uncertain geopolitical context. By sketching the broader political turmoil of the time, this article aims to contextualize the slave revolt as part of a series of struggles aiming at social and political change.

In December 1796 a coalition of Curaçaoans carried out a coup d'état. With substantial popular support, the Military Committee replaced the acting representative of the Batavian Republic Jan Jacob Beaujon with Johan Rudolph Lauffer. Beaujon had been appointed as acting governor in August of that year. This came after Governor Johannes de Veer had stepped down, refusing to swear loyalty to the Batavian Republic. The quick succession of governors in 1796, due to political conflict, was uncommon on Curaçao. The island had long been ruled by the same governor, who directly represented the Dutch West India Company (WIC). Even after the company's charter was not renewed in 1791 and the Dutch state assumed the administration of the WIC's domains, the organizational structure had been left unaltered and personnel had stayed in place (Van Goor 1994:173). With the French occupation of the Netherlands in 1795, the Dutch Patriot movement came to power and founded the Batavian Republic.

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The Dutch Patriots did not plan to change anything about the governance of their colony (Schutte 1974:15). Only very few politicians in the metropolis had the idea that something needed to change in how the island was governed. On Curaçao, however, a popular movement pushed for a change in the colony's government and policies. The result of this was the coup d'état carried out by the Military Committee and Johann Rudolph Lauffer in December 1796.

In the months before the great slave revolt of 1795 there was a rapid increase in civil unrest on the island. Fights broke out between the garrison and the free whites and mulattoes in the city (Hamelberg 1897:25). While the slave revolt temporarily pushed the urban citizenry back into the fold, the conflicts escalated again in 1796. The National Assembly of the Batavian Republic was warned of the situation and sent Vice-Admiral Braak to the West Indies to ensure the colonies would not change sides and join the former stadholder William V and the English. In August 1796 the governor and council of Curaçao were asked to take an oath of allegiance to the newly formed Republic.² Because Governor Johannes de Veer and two other dignitaries refused this, the state apparatus entered a crisis. A substantial number of people in the military did not approve of the officials' resignation. They saw it as a surrender of the Orangists to the Patriots. Soldiers and officers openly contested the new power holders. It seemed uncertain if the governor and council would be able to hold on to their positions. The unstable state of affairs existed for four months from 10 August 1796 until 1 December 1796. During this period a substantial section the Curaçaoan population developed a set of demands and political leadership independent of the metropolis. This movement, labelled here as that of 'the Curaçao Patriots', headed a coalition that ousted the official representative of the Republic in December 1796.

The political power struggle of 1796 was very much a local affair. In this sense it was strikingly similar to the contemporaneous struggles in Dutch cities, where engaged and quite radical movements also proliferated (Prak 1991; Jourdan 2006). However, the context of slavery, racism and intense imperial competition in the region did give the Patriot movement a very specific form on the island.

Historians have reduced the political conflict on the island at the time to a brawl between Patriots and Orangists or pro-French and pro-

2 The Dutch Republic was defeated during the Coalition Wars against revolutionary France. Aided by a French invasion the Dutch Patriot movement took power and founded the Batavian Republic. The former stadholder fled to England, from where he unsuccessfully tried to mount a resistance by, among other things, sending a letter to the colonies asking them to surrender to the English.

English forces (Hamelberg 1897; Hartog 1961; Goslinga 1990). The division between Orangists and Patriots was copied from the major political conflict that existed in the Dutch Republic between 1780 and 1787. Dutch Patriot agitation had focused on the need for economic, political and cultural nationalism. Those who did not believe in revolutionary change rallied behind stadholder William V, member of the House of Orange, and were subsequently called Orangists. The Patriot movement managed to control several city councils and mounted a considerable threat to the status quo. On behalf of the Orangists, the Prussian army invaded to restore order. This forced many Patriots into exile. Anticipating renewed support in Dutch cities and with the help from the invading French revolutionary army, they returned to the country and came to power in January 1795. Under the slogan 'Vrijheid, Gelijkheid en Broederschap' (freedom, equality and fraternity) they founded the French-leaning Batavian Republic. The Batavian Republic was politically divided between the Moderates, Unitarians (radicals), and Federalists (conservatives). These factions clashed regularly in the National Assembly on many issues, but on the colonies, the Patriots had very little to say. They certainly did not nurture many revolutionary plans. Meanwhile, popular support for the Batavian Republic and its French patrons waned as the French occupation became an ever bigger burden on the population in the form of taxation and conscription.

On Curaçao the anti-Orangist opposition had substantial local roots. The urban citizenry participated actively in the events of 1796 and the years that followed. Their actions in the militia, combined with the political demands they voiced in petitions helped the Curaçao Patriots come to power. The moderates wanted better defences for the harbour and a neutral position in international relations so as not to scare away ships from any particular nation. The radicals (both coloured and white) pushed for a more fundamental transformation supported by a French invasion. This article focuses on the political divisions on the island, and the coming to power of the Curaçao Patriots. It examines the political content of the conflicts on the island and frames these in their Atlantic context.

REPRESENTATIVES OF THE REPUBLIC

After the bankruptcy of the Dutch West India Company in 1791, the Dutch States General took over the company and its domains (Den Heijer 1994:187). Curaçao became the direct responsibility of the States General through the directly subordinate institution of the

Council for Colonies in America and the Possessions of the State in Africa (Hartog 1961:322). With the transfer of power, nothing changed in the formal structure of the colony and the personnel working for the local state apparatus. The governor ruled the island together with the Political Council, which decided on policy matters as well as on criminal cases. The council was made up of the governor, the commanders of the navy frigates, the commander of the garrison, the commissioner for the slave trade and the militia captain. While Curaçao's ruling council had initially been an entirely military body, by the end of the eighteenth century, islanders could be co-opted into the council by the governor. The West India Company would then ratify the decision (Goslinga 1990:337). Nevertheless, the military remained a dominant element in the council.

Johannes de Veer was governor of Curaçao at the time the West India Company ceased to exist. De Veer had been part of the island's bureaucracy since the late 1750s (Krafft 1951:250). He worked as the accountant of the garrison³ and later as secretary of the island's political council.⁴ He became governor in 1782. The commanders of the two frigates *Medea* and *Ceres* played an important role in local politics. They participated in the meetings of the Political Council, the main governing body of the colony. F.S. Wierts was commander of the frigate *Medea* of 36 cannons and 800 tons. Albert Kikkert was colonel and captain at sea of the frigate *Ceres* of 40 cannons and 860 tons. The crews of both ships were in a bad state. Many had died or were in hospital, and the rest were hungry and poor. Wierts had left the Republic in July 1793. During his stay in Willemstad the state of the navy vessels deteriorated (Milo 1936:326). Kikkert was one of the military commanders who kept his position after the Batavian Republic was founded. As leader of an important part of the military, he played a major role during the disturbances in the 1790s. He would also prove to be very capable of surviving political ruptures. After the founding of Kingdom Holland under Louis Napoleon, Kikkert received a high ranking position in the navy. Under King William I, he returned to Curaçao as governor.

Military power on the island was exercised by the garrison, the navy ships, and the civil militia. The ships played a significant role, as they were armed with a substantial number of canons, and were supposed to be able to deflect threats to the city of Willemstad. During domestic disturbances, the cannons on the *Ceres* were

3 Instructions for Johannes de Veer Abrahamszoon, installed as accountant of the garrison on the island of Curaçao (Schiltkamp & De Smidt 1978, I:333).

4 Instructions for a new captain-lieutenant of the Artillery (Schiltkamp & De Smidt 1978, I:343-351).

often loaded and aimed not at sea but at the city. Kikkert mentions that he loaded them with shrapnel when news of the slave revolt arrived. He also threatened to bombard the garrison during a conflict in 1796 (Milo 1936). The commanders of both ships were not transients in the city but an integral part of the ruling elite on the island. Kikkert and Wierts were supposed to work together, but there are many reports of them falling out with each other and having considerable arguments about political decisions. In July 1796 Kikkert took temporary command of both ships while Wierts recovered from an attack by an armed group of men 'wearing French national cockades'. During this incident captain Robert Minors died and Wierts was severely wounded (Hamelberg 1897:28).

POLITICAL RADICALISM AND THE BROADER OPPOSITION MOVEMENT

It was quite common for conflicts in the wider Atlantic World to be imported to the island. When the American War of Independence (1775-1783) broke out, the Curaçaoan government had to take measures to prevent citizens of the warring nations from provoking and violently clashing with each other in the city. Enthusiasm for the ideology of the French Revolution was countered in a similar way in 1789 (Schiltkamp and De Smidt 1978:381). An ordinance was issued that forbade the singing of French revolutionary songs and the wearing of decorations with French revolutionary slogans (Hartog 1961:322; Schiltkamp and De Smidt 1978:389). That same year a commission from the States General visited Curaçao to investigate what had caused animosity between the local government and the colony's inhabitants (De Gaay Fortman 1919:442). By 1793 the revolutionary undercurrent was led by Jan Hendrik Hansz and Cornelis Berch. Their speeches prompted a ban on public speaking against the House of Orange on 21 May of that year. Attending these speeches was forbidden, and those who did and failed to inform public prosecutor Van Teijlingen were to be punished.

The Revolutionaries were accused of playing a key role at the start of the slave revolt of 1795. The governor sent letters to the Netherlands complaining about the behaviour of the radicals. Hartog writes that clashes between the soldiers and citizenry intensified after the news arrived that the Netherlands had been liberated (or occupied, according to one's point of view) by the French. On 4 August 1795 an ordinance was issued forbidding freemen and 'Negroes' to walk with sticks and clubs. Soldiers below the rank of officer were banned from wearing their weapons when not on

call, and sailors, except those from the frigates, were summoned to gather in the harbour after nine p.m. At that hour the pubs and dance halls had to close as well (Hartog 1961:324).

Hansz played an important role in focusing the attention of the National Assembly on the disloyal attitude of the rulers of Curaçao. A letter from Hansz was read in which he complained about the ban on wearing the alliance cockade (Wagenaar 1806:306-9).⁵ The National Assembly was unhappy about the ban on wearing revolutionary cockades. From the floor of the assembly it was said that Jan Hendrik Hansz was known to the Patriots as being a good man, and the Curaçao government was ordered to protect him.⁶

While vocal opposition was largely restricted to the Revolutionaries in the years preceding the slave revolt, thereafter and particularly during 1796 an opposition movement grew amongst the island's middle class. Uniting behind the leadership of Johann Rudolph Lauffer, these Curaçaoan Patriots handed in several petitions demanding from the government both a change in policy as well as a change of personnel. One of these petitions stated that 'this island's sole source of wealth is trade'. The petitioners complained that Jewish brokers monopolised contacts with captains who arrived from abroad, which allegedly hurt the trade of the gentile merchants on the island, preventing them from making deals with foreign captains. The petitioners also wanted to ban foreign competitors by levying a five per cent tax on trade not conducted by inhabitants of the island. This was supposed to increase trade and ban the 'deception by foreign merchants'. The final request was to install a port pilot to promote the safety of the harbour.⁷

Johann Rudolf Lauffer was one of the central figures in a movement that might be seen as the Curaçaoan version of the Patriot movement. Together with fellow islanders he handed in numerous requests defending the position of specific merchants or more general requests like the one cited above. Lauffer had arrived as a common soldier in 1776 on the island. What we know about the period before his arrival on Curaçao is based on his own account, in which he depicts himself as an idealistic young man from Switzerland, who was inspired by 'Voltaire, Rousseau, d'Alembert, Diderot, and the other encyclopaedists'. How much of this is true we do not know, but it is at least telling of the kind of man Lauffer aspired to be (Van Meeteren 1944:13).

5 Dagverhaal der Nationale Vergadering, session 20-5-1796, nr. 67, and session 23 May 1796, nr. 533.

6 Dagverhaal der Nationale Vergadering, session 4-7-1795, nr. 110.

7 OAC 138, 'Request for improvements of trade and the harbour', first half 1796.

During the slave revolt Lauffer did not play any notable role. In the period following the revolt he became a respected person amongst the Willemstad citizenry. After the changing of the oath on 10 August 1796, the white civil militia demanded that they elect a new Captain to replace the disliked Orangist Bernardus Anthony Cancrijn, who had stepped down in the meeting where the oath to the Batavian Republic had to be taken. The militia elected Lauffer to be their Captain.⁸ He immediately started to collect weapons from the inhabitants to increase the militia's strength. Lauffer's choices suggest a grand plan to make Willemstad regain its reputation as a neutral port to do business. In order to accomplish this, reliable armed forces were needed, as well as strong defences, and discipline among slaves and the white lower classes in the city. The Orangist elements in the local government seemed an obstacle to accomplish this, and had to be removed from office. While this could have been done quite easily if the French were invited to land and disarm the Orangists, the Curaçao Patriots were not interested in a French take-over.

Within the council there was a heated debate about whether or not the French should be allowed more influence on the island. Illustrative was the discussion about flying the French flag next to the Dutch one from the fortress in Willemstad. Should the French flag be there permanently or only if ships from other nations were approaching? In this debate, the Curaçao Patriots only wanted to use the threat of French military power to scare away others by raising the French flag on strategic moments. However, they did not want it to interfere with the island's autonomy.⁹

In petitions to the council in support of Lauffer there was a significant shift in the identity of signatories. The people who signed the petitions proposed a tax on goods taken from prize ships, which could be used by Lauffer to aid the construction of better defence works.¹⁰ In the first petition (157 signers) the radicals Hansz and Berch are found at the top. Their political allies Jean Baptiste Tierce Cadet – a remarkable figure discussed at length in Han Jordaan's contribution to this volume – and P. Duyckinck were not far behind them.¹¹ On the second petition (132 signers), Berch is still leading the list, but a large group of Jews had been added to their ranks.

8 OAC 106, 'Minutes', 15-8-1796.

9 OAC 106, 'Combined Council', nr.8 on 12-9-1796.

10 OAC 138, 'Petition for the improvement of the defense under the command of Lauffer', nr.104 between 28-10 and 4-11-1796. The building of the fortress 'Republic', seen by historians as the only success of the period, was attributed to the leadership of Lauffer.

11 OAC 138, 'Petition in support of Lauffer 24-9-1796', nr.105 24-9-1796.

A considerable section of the island's Jews became interested in the ideas of the French Revolution.¹² The island was traditionally home to a Jewish community heavily engaged in both trade and shipping. The Jewish community in the Republic was strongly divided between Orangists and Patriots. Impoverished Jews in Curaçao showed an interest in the ideals of equality, fraternity, and freedom of the French Revolution. The Jews who congregated in the Neve Shalom synagogue tried to break with the metropolitan community in Amsterdam and were generally more sympathetic to the revolution. Among them were Moses Frois (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970:286) and the French agent Isaac Sasportas.

There were hardly any plantation owners amongst those who signed, although many of those on the list would obtain a plantation in the years after the revolution.¹³ The content of the petitions did not differ very much, except that the second one was more radical in its demands, requesting for all military responsibility to be taken away from Beaujon and handed to Lauffer and Kikkert.¹⁴

REVOLT IN THE ARMED FORCES

In 1796, the newly formed Batavian Republic sent Vice-Admiral Adriaan Braak to the West Indies to assert the power of the new Republic over its West Indian domains. Braak was granted the mission to dismiss all colonial officials from their oath to the stadholder – who had sent a letter from Kew asking the colonies to follow him and join the English against the French and against the Batavian Republic – and have them swear loyalty to the Batavian Republic. Braak's intervention was not supposed to upset the power structure or replace any officials. The Dutch Patriots were not interested in changing the economic and social structures or in purging Orangist elements in the colonies, but the situation on Curaçao proved to have a dynamic they could not control.

Governor De Veer refused to go to the council's extraordinary meeting where loyalty to the Batavian Republic had to be declared. He said he felt ill and wanted to use this opportunity to resign. De

12 The Jews on the island, who had strong ties to the Amsterdam community, were only emancipated as late as 1825. *Publicatie en provisioneel Regelement Van Zijne Hoogheid den Heere Prince van Oranje Nassau, etc.* (Den Haag 1750) 7; cited in Kaplan 1982:203, 207.

13 The names on the petition have been checked against the list of plantation owners in Van der Lee 1989. The family of Cornelis Berch did own some land, but the signers who were able to acquire land at some stage in their lives did so after the events of 1796.

14 OAC 138, 'Petition in support of Lauffer 4-11-1796', nr. 104.

Veer had been part of the local bureaucracy since the 1750s and had notified the council before about his wish to step down. It was decided that power would be handed to a provisional governor who could later be approved by the States General. During that same meeting where the governor was absent, secretary Petrus Bernardus van Starkenborgh and captain of the civil militia Bernardus Anthony Cancrijn stepped down.¹⁵ This opened the floodgates of revolt. All of a sudden a group of senior officials arose, openly contesting the sovereignty of the Batavian Republic on the island. Following the example of the defectors in government, several army officers also started to refuse the new oath, and with them parts of the garrison as well (Wagenaar 1806:306). The Patriots sought to make good use of this walkout by electing Patriots to the now vacant positions. The new – provisional – governor was not elected. A sealed letter received from Holland named Beaujon as De Veer's provisional successor. The Patriots initially trusted him because he had received approval from the Batavian Republic's Committee for Colonial Affairs.

During this same council session a revolt was brewing in Fort Amsterdam, the island's main fort. The officer who received the orders to organize the ceremony whereby the provisional governor would have to present himself to the citizens strongly advised against arming the garrison for the event. He had sensed the atmosphere amongst the troops well. When Beaujon showed himself on the balcony of the fortress, the soldiers and several officers shouted 'Orange on top', and riots occurred. On the frigate *Ceres* cannons were loaded to fire at the rioters (Milo 1936:329). Parading the new governor through the streets was quickly cancelled.¹⁶ Resigned of the oath to the stadholder, but armed and decorated with orange ribbons, the soldiers roamed through the streets and fortress. What started out as a quick advance for the Patriots soon turned into a crisis during which the Patriots were holding office, but their auxiliaries were outside of their control.

Multiple contenders were claiming to be in charge of the island while they only controlled part of the state apparatus. The militia was in Patriot hands, while the allegiance of the garrison and the crews on board the navy vessels was uncertain, but they were possibly Orangists.¹⁷ The council and governor feared for their safety

15 OAC 106, 'Extraordinaire politie raad', 11-8-1796.

16 OAC 106, 'Extraordinaire politie raad', 11-8-1796.

17 Later it became clear that Patriot officers were also in the army, but due to the isolation of the Patriot voice in the armed forces, they kept silent. After the protests by the Orangists in the garrison, Lieutenant Colonel Huische was asked to help restore order amongst the troops. He said that was impossible as long as the officers had not sworn loyalty to the Batavian Republic. OAC 223, *Plakaten, Publicaties, edictale citaties, vrijbrieven, paspoorten, zeebrieven, commissies, instructies en eden van ambtenaren, 1722-1803*, nr. 450-550.

and fled to the *Ceres*. While the crew accepted them on board, they used the opportunity to demand their pay, arguing that they needed their wages earned under the old oath, before they could accept a new one. The crew on the other navy vessel, the *Medea*, also disobeyed orders, demanding their wages and threatening to mutiny (Milo 1936:330). The Patriots had no choice but to respond to the rebellion in the armed forces. The Orangists had a very real possibility to return to power through a counter-revolutionary coup with the support of the mobilized armed forces. To buy off the impending mutiny, the Patriots increased the army's rations.¹⁸ This defused the immediate threat of mutiny of the armed forces. The officers who refused to re-enter the service boarded a U.S. brig and left the island.¹⁹

Undoubtedly with the recent slave revolt in mind, one of the first actions of the new council was to invite the captains of the Free Negro Corps and the Free Mulatto Corps to make sure that they would keep quiet during the regime change.²⁰ Ensuring this was important since their loyalty had been questioned during the black revolt in 1795, when they had only mobilized a few men (Paula 1974:299). After the initial chaos in early August the council got some room to breathe. Not that order was restored, but the direct threat to their position seemed to have passed. There were still many disturbances in the city, and curfews were issued for slaves, soldiers, and sailors. Inns were closed, and the selling of drink was restricted.²¹

The French 'allies' now tried to assert their control over the island from Guadeloupe. This followed logically from the strategy of the revolutionary governor of Guadeloupe, Victor Hugues. Hugues had been appointed by the Jacobins to bring the decree of slave emancipation to Guadeloupe and capture the island from the English. Besides his great influence on race relations on the island, Hugues also turned Guadeloupe into a French military stronghold against the English in the Caribbean (Dubois 1999). The Curaçao Patriots – despite their trouble holding on to power – were not eager to allow French meddling. They thought they could fend for themselves and did not need interference, let alone occupation.²² Only the French suggestion to restructure the militia was followed, as it overlapped with the plans of the Curaçao Patriots to strengthen the island's defences.

18 OAC 106, 15-8-1796.

19 OAC 106, nr.2, 11-8-1796.

20 OAC 106, 'Extraordinary meeting of the political council', nr. 2, 11-8-1796.

21 OAC 106, 'Minutes', 20-8-1796.

22 They complied with some suggestions: OAC 106, 'Minutes', 17-8-1796.

THE BREESTRAAT MEETING

The organized response from the Orangists in the military against the advance of the Curaçao Patriots and Revolutionaries came in late August 1796. A number of high ranking officers were angry about the way they had been excluded from the decisions made by the council in the period around the change of power. In a letter they threatened the council that peace could only be maintained if the Orangist officials De Veer, Cancrjn and Van Starckenborgh were returned to office.²³ If that did not happen 'the undersigned would take no responsibility for what would follow'.²⁴ This threat came at a time when the atmosphere in the council was tense due to a conflict over the appointment of a new secretary.

The intended appointment of J.M. Brunnings as secretary to the council caused a first moment of polarisation between provisional Governor Beaujon and the Curaçao Patriots and Revolutionaries. Lauffer, as captain of the Civil Militia, used the threats of disturbances from the armed citizenry to put pressure on Beaujon and the council.²⁵ Beaujon was stringent in his defence of the appointment. He said 'that there is no popular vote here, if the council wished to listen to the voice of the people, his lordship [Beaujon himself] will resign from office'. Beaujon went on the offensive because 'his lordship had found a willing commander to escort [the new secretary] during the presentation through the city'. Protesting at the presentation of newly appointed officials was a recurring element of oppositional movements. For the governor and council these moments were important to affirm their position. It looked as if Beaujon was planning to use the parading of the new secretary as a test of the relative strength of the Orangist army and the opposing citizenry. And he apparently had found part of the army willing to enter in this confrontation. Lauffer and the other Patriots did not like this idea at all and managed to postpone the event. The parade of Brunnings could proceed only after Lauffer had convinced the wider opposition movement not to resist the appointment. He then notified the council that 'the largest and best part of the Citizens supported the presentation'.²⁶ Lauffer had thus removed the fuse from the powder keg by pacifying the citizens and therewith had ensured that Beaujon did not get the confrontation that he was

23 At around the same time, Van Starckenborgh was accused of being pro-English. He denied this, emphasizing that he resigned because he did not agree with the new constitution.

24 OAC 106, between 20-8-1796 and 31-8-1796.

25 OAC 106, 23-8-1796.

26 OAC 106, 23-8-1796 and 24-8-1796.

looking for. That way Lauffer reaffirmed his position as a central figure within local politics.

While Beaujon was mustering his forces in the army, the armed and more radical part of the anti-Orangist movement – excluding Lauffer – came to the fore. They had been leading the petition movement, but were looking for stronger measures as well. They met after a meeting of the militia where they had voiced their opposition to Beaujon. Their plan was to elect commissioners to take control over the defences of the island (Hamelberg 1897:30). Beaujon, on the other hand, was starting to show his true colours. He was ready to unleash the Orangist army on the subversive meeting, and this time not under the pretension of safeguarding the parading of the new secretary, but to directly break up the meeting representing the radical side of the opposition movement.²⁷

Captain Kikkert and Captain Lieutenant Heshusius²⁸ urged Beaujon not to let the ‘armed forces march against the citizenry’. They undoubtedly thought that once the military had been released, they would not stop at smashing the rebellious citizens, but would also attack the council and restore the Orangists to power. Wiert threatened to fire the cannons of his frigate *Ceres* on the garrison if they would march out to the meeting in the Breestraat (Hamelberg 1897:30). Again Lauffer prevented a confrontation with the garrison. He succeeded in convincing Beaujon not to march the troops against the armed civilians. The next day a publication was issued by the governor and council in response to the events of that day. The *oprokken van het gemeen* (agitating the commoners) was denounced in strong language. The authorities especially condemned that civilians ‘used weapons that were handed to the good citizens and inhabitants solely for maintaining peace and order, and for the defence against an enemy that seeks to attack this land from outside’.²⁹

The ‘extraordinary and serious publication’ also prohibited ‘Clubs’.³⁰ The reason for this addition to the public announcement is somewhat mysterious. Clubs formed a central element of the Patriot movement in the Netherlands and had been of more significance to the Batavian revolt than the mythical cold winter of 1794-1795. Whether there were revolutionary clubs on Curaçao is not certain, and maybe they were only imagined by the government trying to vilify the movement or explain the salience of the street protest.

27 OAC 106, ‘Extraordinary meeting of the Council of Policy’, nr. 11, 27-9-1796.

28 He had sailed with Braak to the West Indies, and was sent by Braak to Curaçao to secure the island.

29 OAC 223, ‘Regulations for maintaining order and peace’, nr. 24, 2-9-1796.

30 OAC 106, 31-8-1796.

According to Lauffer this publication was ill received by the citizenry.³¹ Counterrevolution had been evaded, but neither the Orangists nor the Revolutionaries had gained victory. The confrontation was a success for the Curaçao Patriots and especially Lauffer. He had shown Beaujon that he could control the radicals, and to the citizens he had illustrated that he could control Beaujon. To accommodate the citizens after the incident of 30 August, a sixth division of the militia was formed. Kikkert and Heshusius told Beaujon that their ships would not attack the city, and surely not the citizens.

The conflict of 30 August had ended as a victory for the moderate Curaçao Patriots. The Revolutionaries lost their rights to have clubs and meetings and were reprimanded for their agitation. The civil militia was expanded with an extra division, and Beaujon was put on the defensive. Kikkert and Heshusius justified their refusal to leave the ships on the basis that the 'persons of Colour' who would see the whites in open confrontation with each other might 'try to strengthen the rebellious movements' and could easily capture the frigate *Medea*.³² It is possible that Kikkert and Heshusius really feared that this might happen. Normally they were not the ones scaremongering in the council. The atmosphere of fear was mostly created by Lauffer, who warned the council about the unrest amongst the populace, and used it as a lever to push through reforms in the military and the general defence of the island.³³

TAKING POWER

As the Curaçao Patriots and Revolutionaries moved closer to power, the fundamental split within their broad opposition movement became clear. The split was between those who tried to make the island neutral, and those who sought to import the French Revolution through an invasion by the French if necessary. After French support had been declined by sending a letter to their commanders, the French kept insisting on 'helping' the islanders. The Curaçao Patriots kept arguing that the 'assistance' by the French should be refused. Those who still sympathized with the Orangists agreed with them on that point. The revolutionary captain of the artillery, Johannes Hendrik Gravenhorst, used the discussion about the raising of the flags to affirm that French assistance should not have been

31 OAC 106, 'Minutes', 27-9-1796.

32 OAC 106, 'Letter from the frigate *Medea*', 31-8-1796.

33 OAC 106, 'Extraordinary meeting of the Political Council', nr. 11, 27-9-1796.

declined in the first place. He wanted to keep a French ship in the harbour on a permanent basis.³⁴ Gravenhorst was a member of the council but also operated in various other circles. Since the council had refused the assistance from the French, he, Berch, Hansz, and some others asked the French Colonel Thomas to land and remove the council (including the Curaçao Patriots) from office (Hartog 1961:469). In late September a group of mulattoes also sent a delegation to French navy vessels in the harbour, requesting them to intervene on the island. Not much later they sent a similar request to them in writing. The letter and the French response were read in the council, but their contents seem to have been lost.³⁵

On 20 October Commander M. Valteau of the French national frigate *La Pensée* co-authored a plan for the general defence of the island.³⁶ He was sent from Guadeloupe and arrived on Curaçao in early October to make new overtures by requesting the formation of a Military Committee (MC).³⁷ This special committee was to deal with all military matters. That same day, citizens of Willemstad handed in a similar proposition to that of the council. Beaujon was furious. When he was unable to prevent a decision on this issue from being made during a council session, he tried to become president of the committee. However, both Beaujon and Wiertz were kept out of the committee because they were not allowed to leave their posts. The letter of the French contained a list of suitable Patriot candidates for the MC.³⁸

The Patriots controlled the MC and started to work on the city's defences. They organized the National Guard, and built a fortress appropriately named Fortress Republic. The infantry was expanded and a four-division-strong cavalry was founded. The artillery was put in the hands of Gravenhorst. With all military matters in anti-Orangist hands, the takeover of the island was almost complete. The navy, garrison, and National Guard were now under the command of the Military Committee.³⁹ It was only a small step to remove Beaujon. The anti-Orangist coalition had succeeded in gaining military control after they had initially met with resistance in August. The corps of free blacks and free mulattoes was already under Lauffer's command.⁴⁰

34 OAC 106, 12-9-1796.

35 OAC 106, 'Extraordinary meeting of the Political Council', 5-10-1796.

36 OAC 106, 'Meeting of the Combined Councils held in Fortress Amsterdam', 20-10-1796.

37 OAC 223, 20-10-1796.

38 OAC 223, 'Letter from the French with directions how to form a Military Committee', 20-10-1796.

39 OAC 106, 'Meeting of the Combined Councils held in Fortress Amsterdam', 20-10-1796. Kikkert announced this, and the other councilors agreed.

40 OAC 106, 'Extraordinary meeting of the Council held after the meeting of the Combined Council', 12-9-1796.

The Military Committee was the institution that would complete the coup d'état. After its installation it started working on discrediting Beaujon. The members of the committee had access to the official papers of the previous governor and started to collect accusations against Beaujon. He was painted as a corrupt Orangist who had conspired with the English and the former stadholder, and had failed to inform the islanders of the founding of the Batavian Republic when he arrived on the island in 1795. He was also said to have convinced his brother, the governor of Demerara, to surrender to the English. Furthermore, he had bought orange decorations with public funds.⁴¹

His defence before the Military Committee was fruitless. On 1 December, Lauffer took power with the support of moderate Patriots, the pro-French Revolutionaries, the revolutionary Jews, the armed forces, and the French from Guadeloupe. Lauffer replaced Beaujon as provisional governor and also held on to his military functions (Hartog 1961:467).⁴² On 6 December, the news was made public with a declaration that opened with the slogan 'Freedom, Equality, Fraternity'.⁴³

CONCLUSION

The metropolitan authorities of the Dutch West India Company, the States General, and the National Assembly of the Batavian Republic had a static view of colonial government. None of them wanted to see any substantial change, neither in the organisational structure nor in the personnel on the ground. Even though great changes were demanded and enforced by the Batavian Republic in the Netherlands itself, the Dutch Patriots did not think the colonies should have a part in these transformations. Influential islanders, on the other hand, did look to implement specific policies mainly to restore the position of Willemstad as a successful nodal point in regional inter-imperial trade.

Robin Blackburn has made a distinction between the power of the metropolis over the colonies and the power of the colonists over their colony. He notes that the first turned out to be fragile at the end of the eighteenth century, while the second was growing stronger (Blackburn 1988:3-4). In the case of Curaçao, this mani-

41 OAC 106, 'Accusations against Beaujon', late November 1796.

42 OAC 106, 1-12-1796.

43 OAC 223, nr.44, 6-12-1796.

fested itself as a conflict between three main positions. The Curaçao Patriots wanted autonomy of the island's governing council. The Revolutionaries (both white and coloured) tried to import the French Revolution. And the Orangists remained loyal to the House of Orange and the former stadholder, who had called on the colonies to surrender to the English. This division was quite similar to rifts in other parts of the colonial Americas.

John Adams – second president of the United States and signer of the Declaration of Independence – had a keen eye for spotting political differences in the North American colonies in the period of the revolutionary upheavals. He wrote that many of those in politics were quite new to 'public business' and often opposed the revolution 'at least in the beginning'. Assessing the division between the various currents in the United States, he said there were three more or less equal groups. One third was in favour of the French, one third sided with England, and the 'middle third, composed principally of the yeomanry, the soundest part of the nation, and always averse to war, were rather lukewarm both to England and France' (Adams 1856:110-1). This division was also seen in Spanish America. The imperial powers France and England tried to rally supporters there, but a substantial section of the colonial populations seems to have been unconvinced they needed either of them (Adelman 2010:71). Instead of being split between Patriots and Orangists, the Curaçaoans seem to have been divided along very similar lines.

People's allegiance and political strategies could change rapidly in the tumultuous years at the end of the eighteenth century. However, some clear trends can be distinguished. The Orangists or pro-English on the island were mostly the old power holders who had ruled the island in the period when it was still governed by the West India Company. They seem to have wanted a quiet return to the status quo ante and were generally opposed to any of the revolutionary quirks. Another group in favour of stability was one section of the high-ranking military, who were loyal to the stadholder. The Curaçaoan Patriots and the supporters of Lauffer were local citizens looking for ways to deal with military and economic changes in the wider Atlantic at the time. The pro-French Revolutionaries integrated fully into Lauffer's movement during the period of the coup d'état. Only when the coup was over did the Revolutionaries mount independent opposition. In view of the disintegrating Dutch mercantile and military power, the Curaçao Patriots tried to keep the island neutral between the other powers and wanted local control over the island's defences in the form of a National Guard and a Military Committee. And as the history of the coup shows, they were willing to oust official metropolitan representatives to achieve their objectives.

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